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BOOK REVIEWS

Íñigo Errejón, Chantal Mouffe (2015), Construir Pueblo. Hegemonía y radicalización de la democracia, Barcelona, Icaria Editorial, ISBN: 978-84-9888-660-3

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Construir pueblo. Hegemonía y radicalización de la democracia from the book cover looks like a sort of instruction manual for constructing a people. It is indeed an in-depth dialogue on some political categories and experiences between Íñigo Errejón, one of the founders of the Spanish party Podemos and Chantal Mouffe, a political theorist who researches populism and post-Marxism.

The book is divided into various discussion topics and aims to produce a broad reflection on the Left, on hegemony, and on populism; more specifically, it seeks to draw a complete picture of the political strategy of Podemos.

The dialogue starts with some considerations from the authors on «Hegemony and Socialist Strategy», the book that Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe wrote in 1985 analysing the theoretic problem of Marxists and Social-democrats versus the new movements developed post-1968 (the ecology, feminist, anti-racist movements and so on). In this work, Laclau and Mouffe posited a reformulation of the socialist project in terms of the radicalization of democracy with a critique of Marxist essentialism, drawing a *fil rouge* between post-structuralism and Gramscian thought. Continuing to follow the reasons that led the authors to write the book almost thirty years ago, Mouffe recalls the

two key concepts for the development of the “Theory of the Politic”: antagonism and hegemony. These two founding concepts connect the reflection of thirty years ago on the radicalization of democracy to the need nowadays to recover democracy before thinking of radicalizing it. The discussion continues with considerations on the enactment of democracy in Spain coinciding with the «Transition» of 1977-1978 and the triumph of neoliberal hegemony, bringing with it the erosion of collective identities, mainly that of class. After arguing over this, considerable numbers of leftists accepted the liberal model. For this reason Mouffe addresses the need to rethink the political contraposition and its models to identify an alternative. Rethinking the political is the way to construct a counterhegemony. Moreover, in Laclau and Mouffe’s book on Hegemony, Mouffe points out the heterodox use of Gramscian thought. However, returning to her reading of Gramsci’s ideas, Mouffe underlines the role of the collective will and general interest in the construction of people. It is in the definition of the common good that the agonistic struggle emerges (the kind of struggle in which the opponents recognize one another and which is compatible with pluralist democracy). Hence, the cultural sphere assumes an important role in building a common sense, which challenges that of the executive sector, as Errejón calls the elites. The construction of an alternative common sense is a counterhegemonic action and this is part of what Gramsci called a «war of position». In this frame, the experience of Podemos in Spain takes advantage of a window of opportunity opened by a crisis of hegemony. All established order is a product of power relations. This is why politics is the primordial ground on which they are played out and from which all others, such as the social, are derived. Nothing is a given, but everything is the result of the «dispute over meaning» (p. 46). Introducing Carl Schmitt and his friend-enemy couple, the two authors examine the question of passions, elements central to the construction of a *nosotros* (Us) and an *ellos* (Them). If this is lacking, politics does not represent a place of partisanship and we could be in the presence of what Mouffe sees as the current model of post-politics. In the age of post-politics people abandon political engagement and this is the premise for the emergence of right-wing populism, which feeds on the absence of other political subjects on the ground and take advantage of existing passions, symbols and identifications, for example patriotism. Referring to the Spanish political context, Errejón shows the role of 15M (Indignados movement) and Podemos in contrasting reactionary populism. Mouffe counters by affirming that the movement and protests generally have a significant role, but if there is no way to channel this opposition to the institutional arena, it could embark on a path that is anything but progressive. This is immediately followed by a clarification as to the link between 15M and Podemos: Podemos is not the 15M movement’s party. Considering the heterogeneity of the movement, Podemos cannot be identified in terms of left

and right (p.66). The main features of Podemos are its institutional project and its involvement in the structure of power. From some considerations on the State, its importance and its naturalness, to reflections on representation and leadership, Errejón and Mouffe move on to Latin America. The experiences of this area have enabled both authors to think differently, in a non-essentialist way, and to understand the importance of bringing together the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary struggles to transform power. In my opinion, this part is the core of the book and in general, for the authors, represents a key element in the redefinition of the strategy of the left, starting from the elaboration of “popular nationalism” (p.73). In sum, Latin America is an experimental terrain on which both conservatives and progressives (especially the leftist parties) are disoriented and the phenomenon of populism acquires relevance. As Errejón states, populism is a central matter. In contrast to the pejorative meaning commonly attributed it, here they highlight the neutrality, or rather, the transversality of the concept, in deference to what Laclau said (Laclau 2008: XXXIII). It is a way of articulating the questions that come from civil society to construct the people (p.84). It is a form more than a content. The conversation between Errejón and Mouffe continues by questioning the reasons for the increasing number of parties with populist features. They conclude that it is a consequence of the era of post-politics experienced in post-democratic societies in which the traditional political channels are not capable of representing the needs and demands of the people, and both right and left advance the same *policies*. At such a time, says Errejón, a “populist rupture” (*ruptura populista*, p.90) may take place, producing a political change. The book also offers an interesting identification of differences between Podemos and the Five-star Movement: for Podemos, online participation does not replace physical participation and its political discourse is more analytical and national-popular than moral.

Another important topic of discussion concerns leadership, which is considered as important as the other constituent elements of a new people (such as symbols, myths, etc.). The figure of a leader is necessary in order to represent a people and to have a “populist moment” (p.98). As Errejón points out, leadership is a relation of representation, where the representation, as Mouffe adds, is simultaneously representation and constitution of identities.

The book also offers a reflection on the categories “left” and “right”. Errejón, referring to the positioning of Podemos, asserts that rather than rejecting these categories, Podemos does not consider them natural or useful to explain the Spanish situation. At this point, the dichotomization of society proposed by Podemos is introduced: the majority and the caste. In Mouffe’s terms, this confrontation is agonistic because it takes place within a representative democracy, although the antagonistic relationship survives

(p.120). In sum, the contest between the people (*el pueblo*) and the caste (*la casta*) is a struggle for hegemony. According to Mouffe, the way to radicalize democracy is to develop a project of left-wing populism. In this sense, the two authors agree on the need to reclaim the term populism and to give it a new meaning and a positive value. Mouffe links the concept of populism to that of left, in fact in her opinion “left” is also a valid concept for political struggle, but it needs to be broken down and reassembled, while maintaining its central connotation of equality (thoughts inspired by her reading of Norberto Bobbio). This is part of the struggle for hegemony and from this perspective the question of “equivalence chains” between various and heterogeneous social questions aiming to create new subjectivities is crucial. In Spain, Podemos is responsible for constructing the collective will and a project for a new country that focuses on the social majority. At the end of the book, there are some pages of notes by Íñigo Errejón. His reflections start from the temporal contingency out of which Podemos emerges and culminate in a sort of call to arms to build a counter-hegemony which is able to work towards an alternative.

Overall the book is very dense, and in my opinion it is enlightening for the following reasons, from small details to the more general: first, it represents an accurate synthesis of Spanish party-movement thought. Second, it offers a complete framework from the political theory point of view, at a time of delegitimization of the institutions and crisis of traditional political structures. Third, in alternating moments of theoretical analysis and empirical reference, the book takes a didactic character, making itself comprehensible even to non-experts and shedding light on concepts that are often mystified nowadays. Populism is one of these. But the authors, with their converging dialogue, suggest a neutral reading of the phenomenon, debunking myths and leading the reader to open and deconstruct its possible superstructures. In the dissociative conception of the Political it is possible to recognize a healthy dose of realism, indispensable in the political arena whether you are a thinker or a political actor *tout court*. Moreover, although I do not agree with defining populism as a political form, but prefer to catalogue it among the political action strategies, I admit the capacity of intervention and articulation of populism in two areas, the institutional and the social. If the neutral ground on which populism is moving is recognized, its transversality ontologically challenges the essentialism of identities. Therefore, in a non-essentialist way of thinking, the creation of a new identity based on conflict dynamics is proposed. The concept that runs through the whole book is that of hegemony, which becomes the motor of history and politics in a continuous development of hegemony and counter-hegemony. These processes are closely linked with that of creation of “common sense” and identities, which seem nat-

ural, but are a social construction through a process of hegemony. These elements, combined with the importance attached to communication, are the political theory underlying the “Podemos hypothesis”. The same political experience of Podemos challenges the crystallization of concepts and identities established by the opponents, at that time hegemonic. As Errejón observes, the key concern of the counter-hegemony is to be able to operate both inside and outside at the same time, or inside and crossing the scenario, building new meanings and itself. Furthermore, a prominent element in the Podemos experiment is the importance of theoretical reflection to move a practical political action. This is a dialectic process that allows Podemos to produce new theoretical oppositions and dichotomies that imply the building of a political force that is able to address the majority and marginalize the minority, in relational terms. Hence, this book critically engages all the manifestations of objectivity; deconstructs and challenges the categories that part of the left has used to create its narrations and proposes a real political theory, offering a general left perspective in a time of anti-politics. Moreover there are two words in English to differentiate between politic as the vision that moves the social order (politics) and politic as the institutional space that is responsible for organizing social coexistence (polity). Rather, Chantal Mouffe’s conception of Politic, aiming to underline the contingency of the social order, is based on precisely this difference.

Finally, I would like to return to the title of the book: *Construir Pueblo. Hegemonía y radicalización de la democracia*, which contains all the elements that make up the theoretical conception of left-wing populism. Indeed “Construction” implies the absence of essentialism; “people” are the reference entity; “Hegemony” is the motor of history; «radicalization» means getting to the root of problems and “democracy” is the aspiration, the promised and necessary land, in which power is effectively that of the “demos”. Therefore the book is really interesting for both scholars of social science and for those who wish to navigate the galaxy of political theory behind the new emerging political actors.